

Aligning Language Education with the CEFR: A Handbook

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*This article briefly presents the handbook *Aligning language education with the CEFR*, which was published in April 2022 and is freely available online. The publication of the CEFR Companion Volume with new descriptors (CEFR CV; Council of Europe, provisional version 2017, definitive version 2020) has caused quite a stir in the field of language education and prompted renewed interest in the content and applicability of the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001). Language assessment professionals in particular have discussed the many implications of the CEFR CV in different contexts and scenarios. The article explains why the handbook was developed and who it is for, describes the steps involved in aligning the different dimensions of language education with the CEFR, and explains how the handbook is organised.*

Keywords: CEFR, CEFR CV, CEFR alignment, language assessment

1 Introduction

This article briefly presents the handbook mentioned in the title, which was published in April 2022, and freely available online. The publication of the CEFR Companion Volume (CEFR CV) with new descriptors (Council of Europe provisional version 2017, definitive version 2020) has caused quite a stir in the field of language education and prompted renewed interest in the content and applicability of the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001). Language assessment professionals in particular have discussed the many implications of the CEFR CV in different contexts and scenarios, which have been reported in this journal from its first issue.

The EALTA CEFR SIG held in Dublin in January 2018 (Little 2018) and the EALTA-UKALTA Symposium hosted by the British Council in London in February 2020 (O'Dwyer et al. 2020; Little and Figueras 2022) focused not only on the potential impact of the CEFR CV on language assessment but also on its implications for language education in general. Discussion at these events and in the various reports and publications mentioned suggested possible ways to increase transparency and collaboration in aligning different components of language education to the CEFR in different contexts and pointed to the need for a document which could support alignment with the greatly expanded descriptive scheme of the CEFR CV.

A small steering group was convened in early April 2020 to revisit the *Manual for Relating Language Examinations to the CEFR* (Council of Europe 2009) and to explore options for replacing it with a handbook that takes account of the recent publication of the CEFR CV, focuses not just on testing and assessment, and addresses a wide range of stakeholders. This steering group included key participants in the 2020 February symposium in London representing a range of organisations: Neus Figueras (EALTA), Barry O'Sullivan (British Council), Nick Saville (ALTE), Lynda Taylor (UKALTA), and David Little, with his extensive

knowledge of the Council of Europe.

Working with a wide range of colleagues across our respective organisations, the steering group has drafted a *Handbook for Aligning Language Education with the CEFR* that offers guidance and support for aligning curriculum guidelines, curricula, syllabuses, teaching materials and assessment with the CEFR.

The handbook was developed in three phases. First, the steering group agreed on its scope, drafted Chapters 1 and 2, an overview of the Council of Europe, the CEFR and the CEFR alignment process proposed in this handbook, and sent them to selected language education professionals for critical feedback. Next, specialists with extensive experience of working with the CEFR were invited to draft Chapters 3-6, which focus on the various stages of the CEFR alignment process. After that, the draft handbook was edited and circulated to the professionals who had provided feedback on the first drafts of Chapters 1 and 2; their comments and suggestions were incorporated in the final draft.

This article introduces the handbook, outlines its main purpose, describes its intended audiences, its contents and its structure, and concludes by encouraging prospective readers and users to share their experience and projects with the intention of incorporating them in a revised edition of the document. The February 2020 symposium concluded that the dissemination of best practice in aligning the elements of language education to the CEFR can promote collaboration between interested parties working in different contexts and contribute to further expansion of professional networks.

2 Why a handbook?

The February 2020 symposium concluded that alignment applies not only to language tests but to policy, curriculum guidelines, curricula, syllabuses, textbooks and other teaching/learning resources. Although these elements impact significantly on one another and on learning, curriculum developers, materials developers, teacher trainers and assessment specialists mostly work independently of one another. The need to consider these elements from a single unified perspective forms the basis of O'Sullivan's (2020) concept of the Comprehensive Learning System (CLS), which the CEFR (2001, 2020) also argues for in the inclusion in its title of the categories learning, teaching, assessment. O'Sullivan argues that the success of any learning system depends on the close alignment of elements that have traditionally been regarded as independent of one another: curriculum, teaching/learning materials, teaching approaches, teacher training, and assessment. Figure 1 below highlights the three core elements of the CLS:

1. **Curriculum** – informal as well as formal
2. **Delivery** – includes teacher selection, teacher training, accreditation, professional development and leadership; teaching and learning materials; the physical environment in which the delivery takes place
3. **Assessment** – includes developmental assessment (diagnostic, aspects of progress, formative, etc.) and judgemental assessment (placement, aspects of progress, achievement, proficiency, etc.)

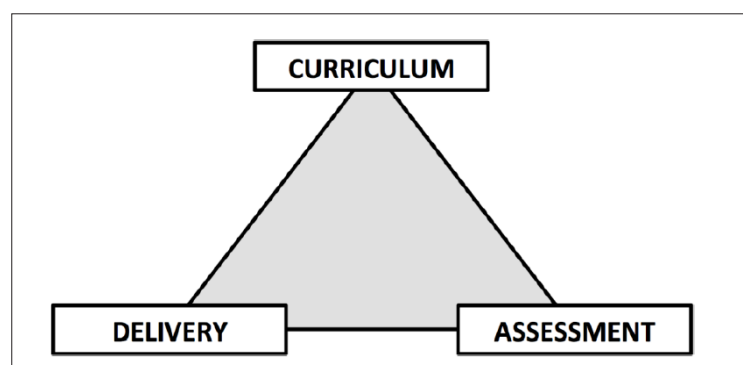


Figure 1. O'Sullivan's Comprehensive Learning System (CLS)

If one of these elements is in any way disconnected from the others, then the system is under threat.

The steering group used the CLS concept as the basis for developing and presenting the different activities of the handbook, which follows the overall structure of the *Manual for Relating Language Examinations to the CEFR* (published in its final version in 2009) but organises its contents so as to emphasise their relevance to different stakeholders working in different contexts.

2.1 Who is the handbook for?

The handbook aims to inform policy makers, teacher educators, teachers and other language education stakeholders and to support the more or less technical processes on which alignment depends. It has been prepared with two audiences in mind, each of which comprises a number of specialised subgroups, as shown below (the bulleted lists do not claim to be exhaustive). In both cases, the handbook is designed to help professionals working on their own, those working within an institution, and those with coordination responsibilities.

AUDIENCE 1	AUDIENCE 2
<p>Those wishing to undertake a practical or applied CEFR alignment exercise in a particular context and for a particular purpose (e.g., to be able to make or evaluate a claim concerning CEFR alignment).</p> <p>This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in-service teachers • materials developers • syllabus designers • pre-service teachers • test producers • textbook writers 	<p>Other stakeholders in education or in society at large who are primarily concerned with policy matters and decision-making relating to language education more generally (e.g., to evaluate the claims made by textbook or test publishers regarding CEFR level).</p> <p>This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • administrators • curriculum developers • education ministry personnel • employers • managers • policymakers • publishers • teacher trainers/educators

Table 1. Target audiences for the handbook

3 What is involved in CEFR alignment?

Undertaking a CEFR alignment exercise involves one of two processes:

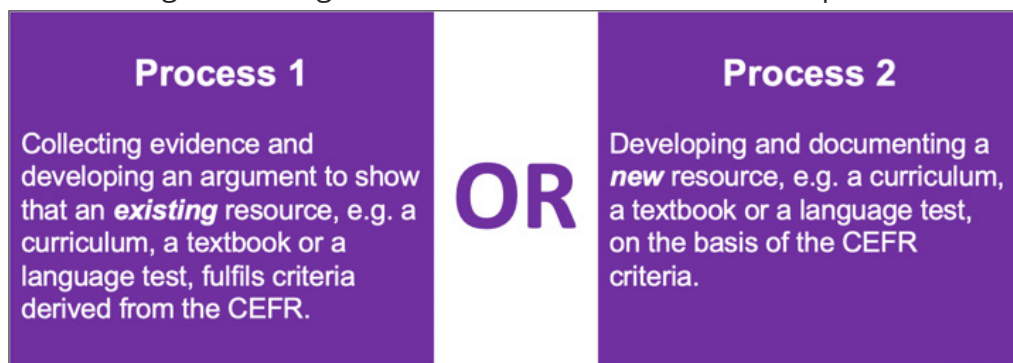


Table 2. Alignment process types

Process 1 and Process 2 both involve a series of well-established and largely sequential steps, or sets of procedures, as shown in Figure 2.

The first step in the alignment process is familiarisation, an essential stage at the outset of any alignment exercise. Experience from previous alignment studies has shown that familiarisation is a very useful, and sometimes necessary, preliminary activity for the other stages because it provides the opportunity to revise and reflect on specific elements relevant to the context of the alignment project.

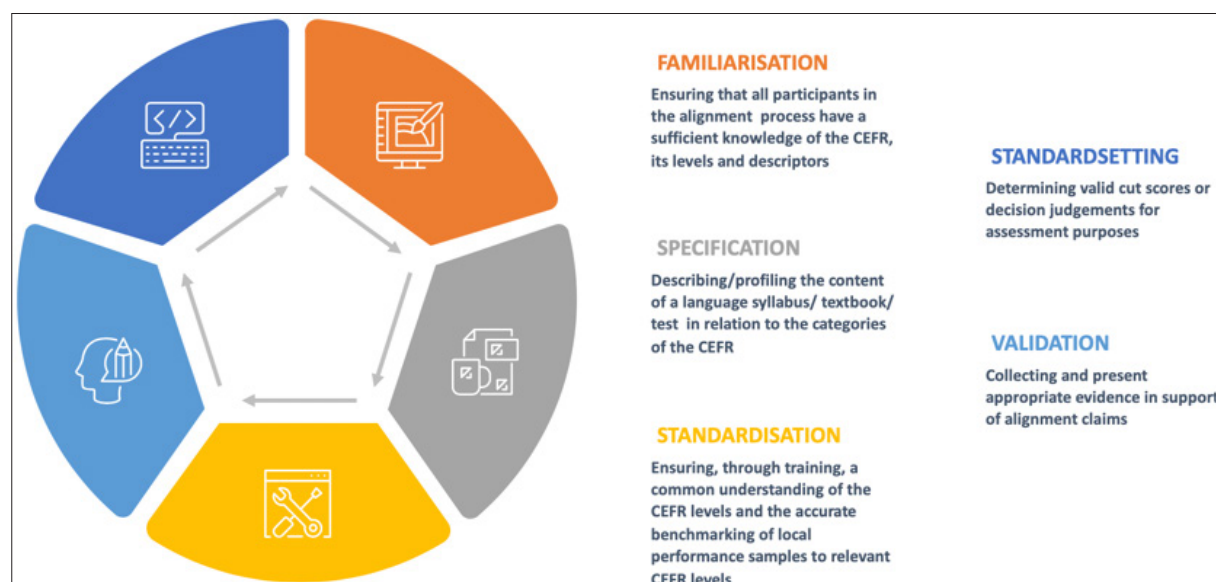


Figure 2. Steps in the alignment process

The next steps are **specification** and **standardisation**, which are required for CEFR alignment projects in most, if not all, contexts of use.

Specification implies the analysis of the content(s) of any resource, existing or new, in terms of approach and coverage in relation to the categories presented in the CEFR, whereas **standardisation** is the process of establishing that the main features of a given resource reflect a clear understanding of the relevant CEFR levels and descriptors.

For those involved in all aspects of establishing an empirically-based link between a curriculum, a set of materials (e.g. textbook or online course), or an assessment or test, **standard setting** procedures are a key requirement. For some of these contexts, the degree of standard setting activity required is likely to be less than we might expect for a test. The specific use of a test determines the choice and appropriateness of standard setting procedures.

Validation is best understood as the continuous process of quality monitoring in order to gather the evidence to support claims of CEFR alignment. Like familiarisation, validation is to some degree relevant to all the other steps in the alignment process – by demonstrating that all stages have been followed in an appropriate way, we establish evidence of the validity of subsequent claims of a link to the CEFR.

3.1 How is the handbook organised?

Each of the chapters focuses on one of the five procedures outlined above. Chapters 1 and 2 have been written to be accessible and directly relevant to both target audiences. Chapter 1 provides an essential introduction to the Council of Europe, the CEFR and the CEFR alignment process. Chapter 2 focuses on familiarisation as an important first step in any alignment project. Chapters 3-6 offer both general

and detailed guidance on the successive steps in an alignment process together with information on available tools and approaches to reporting on the activities undertaken.

The handbook refers to the CEFR 2001 and the CV 2020 as a *single* resource when undertaking the CEFR alignment process, and points readers and users to other publicly available resources which served as a basis for the handbook.

Each chapter begins with an explanation of the procedure and its importance, followed by general advice and practical activities that are relevant to all users regardless of language education context and their focus (e.g. curriculum, teaching, assessment). The remainder of each chapter offers more targeted guidance and practical activities specific to different contexts of use and their associated stakeholders, e.g. language teachers, curriculum designers, textbook writers, test producers. Readers and users can select from and focus on these according to need and context.

As the alignment process may be planned as a group approach and involve one or more coordinator(s) and participants, some practical advice and suggestions relating to these differing roles are included, including tasks to be completed with likely timings. At the end of each chapter, a “Notes for your own implementation” section provides a final reminder of the essential components of the activities presented.

The appendix contains photocopiable summary forms to use and complete. This additional practical tool can assist users in their ongoing monitoring and validation throughout the alignment process. The forms can be used as they are presented or adapted to fit the needs of a particular alignment approach or resource.

The handbook encourages reflection, and as users are the best judges of what is (and is not) possible or realistic within their specific context, it encourages them to tailor all activities to the specific context, taking account of available resources and limitations.

4 Future prospects

It is not possible to predict the success of the handbook presented here. Given the huge impact of the CEFR 2001 and the interest raised by the CEFR CV (COE 2020), we expect that this first edition will soon be put to use in alignment projects by many different stakeholders in the field of language education. We would like to invite those involved in such projects to share not only their outcomes, but also their views on the usefulness of the handbook. There are plans to host an event in early 2024 to present case studies and good practices in the use of the handbook so that the resulting suggestions and proposals can be incorporated in a future edition.

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6 Biographies

Neus Figueras coordinated the development of foreign language curricula and certificate examinations for adult language learners in the Catalan ministry of education in Spain for over 20 years. She has been involved in a number of international research and development projects related to assessment at different education levels. She collaborates regularly with the Council of Europe in the uses and the dissemination of the CEFR. She is a founding member of EALTA (European Association for Language Testing and Assessment) and was the first president of the association. She is currently the coordinator of the EALTA CEFR SIG.

David Little is a Fellow Emeritus of Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. His principal research interests are the theory and practice of learner autonomy in second language education and the management of linguistic diversity in schools and classrooms. He has been a regular contributor to the Council of Europe's language education projects since the 1980s, especially in relation to the European Language Portfolio. In 2010, the National University of Ireland awarded him an honorary doctorate in recognition of his contribution to language education in Ireland and further afield.

Barry O'Sullivan is the Head of Assessment Research & Development at the British Council. He has undertaken research across many areas on language testing and assessment and its history and has worked on the development and refinement of the socio-cognitive model of test development and validation since 2000. He advises ministries and institutions on assessment policy and practice and is particularly interested in the communication of test validation and in test localisation. He is the founding president of the UK Association of Language Testing and Assessment (UKALTA) and holds honorary and visiting chairs at a number of universities globally.